

File #

THE HISTORY

Elvis was in the Army, Eisenhower was in the White House, and you could buy a ladies' swimsuit for \$8.99 at Gilchrist's in Quincy the year commuter rail died on the South Shore.

Most blame the Old Colony Railroad's demise in 1959 on that year's completion of the Southeast Expressway, a wide-open asphalt invitation for commuters to flock to their cars.

But the new highway was only one factor in the railroad's death. It had been losing passengers — and money — years before the expressway opened.

The railroad was founded in 1845 as a passenger line from Boston to Plymouth with stops in Braintree and Whitman. And for decades it flourished.

By the late 1800s, branches extended like a spider's web throughout the South Shore and Cape Cod.

At the turn of the century, Old Colony offered 29 trips a day from Quincy to Boston on weekdays and six on Sundays. A special theater train ran to Boston in the evenings.

Sherwood Burnett, a 75-year-old North Scituate resident, fondly remembers his daily Old Colony commute to Boston.

He recalls the way the old heavy coaches rocked him to sleep in the evenings, the steam whistle blowing at the crossings, the easy camaraderie among riders.

"The windows were fairly big, and you could look out and speed along," said Burnett, who worked in sales for a Cambridge high tech firm. "At night I could read a chapter or talk to the people around me or doze. It was quite comfortable."

For an extra fare, Burnett could sit in the club car to smoke and socialize.

"The biggest advantage was that it completely sealed off the day," said Burnett, who reluctantly switched to his car after his company moved to Newton in 1952.

Faced with increasing competition from cars, buses and electrified rapid transit and streetcars, rail service started to fall off after World War I.

By 1948 the railroad posted annual losses of \$3.8 million. Anxious to shed its unprofitable passenger service, the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad Co., which owned Old Colony, made deep cuts in service. Ridership tumbled.

In 1958 service was stopped for one day and then restarted after the state agreed to a \$900,000 subsidy.

Not long after, George Alpert, the railroad's president, said he needed another \$1.1 million. The state refused.

The choice between raising taxes to subsidize the railroad or using the new highway was quickly made. Old Colony's 9,000 riders gave up without much of a fight.

On July 1, 1959, passenger service ended just after midnight when trains from Brockton and Greenbush pulled into South Station.

In North Scituate people gathered at the station and a trumpeter played taps as the last car headed out. The engine from Brockton carried a funeral wreath.

When the wooden rail bridge over the Neponset River burned down in a mysterious fire in 1960, it dashed any hopes of reviving service anytime soon.

And with the MBTA Red Line extension to Quincy in 1971 and to Braintree in 1980, talk of reviving Old Colony died down.

Then, in 1984, mounting traffic woes on the South Shore breathed new life into old train line.

"It's come full circle," Burnett said.

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Hingham Station before service stopped in 1959.

